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WHY WE NEED A NATIONAL UNIVERSITY.

BY PROFESSOR SIMON NEWCOMB.

THE idea of founding a great university at the seat of government of the United States is as old as the Constitution. The subject was considered by the makers of that instrument, and it may fairly be inferred from the debates that it was dropped only because, under the clause relating to the District of Columbia, Congress had ample power to found a university. Washington took such interest in the project that he bequeathed to the nation in aid of it a sum which at the time appeared munificent, and which would have insured its successful foundation had the fund been securely and profitably invested. It is even said that he selected, on the banks of the Potomac, as a site for the institution, a hill which was afterward occupied by the old Naval Observatory. Presidents have formally recommended the measure, and philosophers and statesmen have shown its expediency. Yet we have entered upon the second century of our national existence without its having advanced beyond the preliminary stage of a bill before Congress.

A national university at Washington seems to me one of the most pressing of our public needs, and one which would long since have been supplied had not strong reasons in favor of doing so been very generally overlooked. I ask leave first to call attention to the harmony of the project with our general educational and political system. In the educational system, three grades or orders are now generally recognized—the common school, the gymnasium or college, and the university. Corresponding to these we have three political powers, on each of which one of these grades of education may legitimately call for assistance. The common-school education is one which every one aims to acquire, and of

which all feel the usefulness. It is of universal interest, and is therefore very properly supported by local institutions, towns, cities, and counties. In the next grade we have the education of the college and the professional and technical schools. The appliances necessary to this education cannot be adequately supplied by the local authorities, and the several States of the Union therefore make provision for it. This recognition of its usefulness has met with the approval of all parties, and is a just source of national pride. The eminent reasonableness of the policy is justified by the consideration that this order of education is of importance to the entire state. If we assume that half a million of the population are required in the learned professions, it is necessary that this number of young men should be properly trained for their duties to society, which are essentially of a public character.

With these two orders of education our political powers have hitherto stopped. But there is a third order, now generally known as post-graduate, which the needs of our time are bringing into prominence. Experience shows that the country and the world has important uses for men who have pursued more advanced studies than those of the college and the medical or law school. The number of such men who are needed is indeed small. One out of a thousand of the whole population, even one out of ten thousand, would suffice. Their utility to the social organism is not to be measured by their numbers, but by their functions. Their work is not only of State, but of national, importance. It is therefore eminently fitting as well as necessary to the perfection of our educational system, that the General Government should provide for the training of this class. That this has not long since been done arises from two causes : a belief that the need is adequately supplied by existing institutions, and, perhaps, a failure to recognize the true value and significance of the higher education.

In saying this I do not intimate that there is any lack of public appreciation of the higher education as a very excellent and noble feature of our social system. In no country is such education more liberally supported by individual effort. The munificence of our wealthy citizens in the endowment of institutions of learning and professorial chairs is not paralleled in any other country. Even were it maintained that these gifts are not always prompted by a pure love of learning for its own sake, and

that the perpetuation of the name of the donor is often a powerful motive, the contention would not weaken the argument. The very fact that the donor takes this method of securing fame shows that learning is honored by our people. If he made the mistake of confounding popular interest with public honor, he would undoubtedly found a national institution for the practice of some form of athletics, rather than a professorial chair.

But it is one thing to say that our public and representative men hold learning in high honor, and quite another to say that they plainly see its relations to the practical work of the nation. The prevailing view is that, while scientific progress and profound learning are very important factors in our national greatness, they are of little or no help in shaping public policy or guiding the work of an administrator. Yet careful thought will show that the higher education has a place in the social organism corresponding in importance to that of the brain in the physical organism, and that its functions are becoming more and more important with the increasing complexity of social and political conditions. If we should go back in imagination three centuries, and repeat the history of the world during that time, with the omission of only one man out of ten thousand, we would reach a nineteenth century with nothing distinctive to boast of. Take out Galileo, and a few other possible men of genius who might have made his discoveries, and we should have no knowledge of the laws of force and motion. Take away Copernicus, Kepler, Newton, and perhaps a hundred men who might possibly have replaced them, and we should have no knowledge of the laws governing the universe. Take a few physical investigators out of each generation, and we should know nothing of the force of steam. Take away a few professors who during the last century amused themselves with investigating the curious properties of electricity, and we should have no knowledge of the practical uses of that agent. Take out a few philosophers, and we should not have our present ideas of human rights, liberties, or popular government. Had one man in a million been taken from each generation we should reach the end of the nineteenth century with the world in the condition of the sixteenth.

If genius has now no such field for its activities as it has had in the past, it is also true that never has civilization had to deal with so many problems requiring both genius and learning for their solu-

tion as at the present moment. Fifty years ago our country was inhabited by individual men, who had few relations, either of commerce or sympathy, with men outside their own community. To-day our sixty millions of inhabitants are parts of a single organism, whose muscles are the railways, and whose nerves are the telegraph, both binding them so closely that every throb in the remotest part is felt through the whole. Thirty years ago labor unions were unknown outside their own places of meeting, and the labor question scarcely existed. To-day this question interests the entire community, and the problem of dealing with it is one of the most troublesome with which we are confronted. Our fathers devoutly accepted, without question, the weather which Providence gave them. We are chafing against our inability to so regulate the aerial currents that they shall water the arid plains into fertility, and asking whether we cannot so change the climate as to populate these plains. To our forefathers the Indians were simply perverse men, for whom the alternative was to be educated into citizens and preached into Christians, or suffer merited death as cumberers of the ground. We are beginning to look at them in a different light, and may hope ere long to base our policy in dealing with them upon a scientific basis.

That the solution of such problems as these should be aided by the highest ability and greatest skill that the government can command goes without saying. But our public does not get the full benefit of these agencies owing to the wide separation between the men who make our laws and deal with these problems, and the men devoted to study and research. The absence of close points of contact between our politics on the one hand, and our literature, art, and science on the other, is a remarkable feature of our political situation. It is true that our government does not fail to avail itself of college graduates to perform the technical duties for which their education fits them. It has been said—and I have no occasion to contest the truth of the statement—that we have a larger body of able scientists in the departments at Washington than at any other capital in the world. But these men have no voice in legislation, except such as appears in an appropriation bill. Their positions prevent them from being powerful factors in shaping the government policy, and render it undesirable that they should become such factors. What we want is a closer

touch between our public men on the one hand, and the higher education, not only in Washington, but in the country at large, on the other hand. The natural and appropriate medium for this would be a national university.

If it be admitted, as I think it must, that the influence of the intellect and culture of the nation upon its politics would be in every way beneficent, then we meet the question how that influence may be increased. A great mistake has been made in supposing that a national university at Washington means the founding of an American Paris, toward which all men of learning shall gravitate, thus lessening the influence of local centres. I therefore beg leave to point out that the effect would be directly the opposite, and that one of the public functions of the university would be the representation at the capital of the learning of the country at large. How little danger there would be of its attracting more students from the existing universities than it would stimulate to go thither is shown by the influence of the Johns Hopkins University upon the higher education throughout our land. The generous rivalry growing out of the efforts of this institution to do more than any other for the higher education has resulted in an increase in the facilities for the higher education at all our principal centres of learning, and in the number of students availing themselves of those facilities. We may confidently anticipate that a national university would have the same effect; that our colleges would everywhere exert themselves to come up to its requirements, that the patrons of those colleges would second their efforts, that the most talented youth would everywhere be stimulated by the consciousness that our political powers honored learning, and that every university in the land would become a more powerful factor than it now is in conferring upon the nation the benefits to be derived from the learning of its graduates.

Illustrations of the immediate practical usefulness of such an institution are not far to seek. Within the past thirty years untold losses in wealth, with their accompaniments of great suffering, have been caused to thousands of our people through settling on the arid lands of the West, under the belief that a change of climate would take place with cultivation. The accident of two or three summers of unusual moisture seemed sufficient to show the truth of the theory in question, and led to the

rejection of more thorough considerations, which would have shown that a change of climate cannot be thus produced. Scarcely had the settlers reaped more than the first scanty crop before years of drouth set in, forcing whole communities to abandon all that was left of the product of their labor. Now, I make bold to say that, had the project of Washington to found a great university at the national capital been carried out, this would not have occurred. Among the subjects of research at such an institution would naturally have been climatology, especially that of our own country. From the very position and objects of the institution a study of this subject would have been prosecuted on an extended scale and founded on better data than those which have actually been used. Able men, desirous of diffusing the most accurate knowledge, would have studied, not only the history of climate in general, so far as it could be learned from records of centuries of observation, but they would also have inquired more carefully into the causes on which climate depends than our existing institutions of learning have had any occasion to do. The natural result would have been that this knowledge would be so diffused in government circles, that not only would no encouragement ever have been given to settlers to try their fortunes on the arid lands, but the latter would have had sources of information within their reach which would have guarded them against their hasty experiment.

I have seen but two reasons against the project which it seems necessary to consider. One is that the wider scope of the teaching at our leading universities, especially the establishment of courses of post-graduate instruction, renders a national university unnecessary. The argument has been met by almost all that has been said in the present paper. Our existing universities do not perform the functions of a national one as we have described them. If it should be claimed that through their graduates who enter into public life they form a connecting link between political thought at the national capital and the intellectual thought of the country at large, the mere statement of the claim would show how extremely slender is the link, and how far it comes from fulfilling the requirements of the situation. It may also be said that we already have more institutions of learning than are necessary, and that we should rather aim to strengthen those which exist than to establish a

new one. But the very object of a national university would be to correct a part of the evil arising from the scattering of our higher education over so many minor points. Formerly many of our colleges had preparatory schools attached. But experience showed that such a school was a positive disadvantage to the college. Now nothing need be said against the present practice of a student remaining at college after he has taken his first degree, in order to further pursue some special line of study. But the main object of a national university will be to concentrate a large amount of research and teaching ability upon those graduates of our colleges who wish to enjoy the advantages which come from association with men wholly devoted to the most advanced studies.

It is also said that party politics will enter into the management of such an institution, and that we shall have political professors as we have political men in other departments of the government. More than thirty years of observation and experience at the national capital have convinced the writer that there is no danger of this result. Politicians are practical men, and as a class are as earnestly desirous of promoting the public welfare as the people at large will permit them to be. The existing institutions of learning at the national capital, which are dependent upon government support, are in no way hampered by their connection with politics.

Finally, the advantages of the national capital in the way of libraries, collections, and the presence of technical facilities for study are very great. These facilities all the departments of the government are ready to place at the disposal of students with a liberality which might be considered as verging upon imprudence. The fact that Washington is a political centre, and the supposed focus of all political activity, would be an advantage rather than a drawback to an institution of learning. The students would be led to take that wide interest in public affairs which it is so often complained that our men of learning do not feel. Any disturbance of that serenity of thought essential to learning would amount only to a wholesome distraction, and would at the same time afford valuable object-lessons in the application of theory to practice.

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